



**Written testimony for the Center for Rural Pennsylvania  
Public Hearing on Rural Population Decline  
Submitted by:  
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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Center for Rural PA hearing on population change. I am Kate Brock, the Executive Director of the [Community Education Center of Elk & Cameron Counties](#). We are an independent 501c3 organization. Our mission involves providing access to continuing education for our rural communities. Today my comments will focus on cultivating community-based leadership. Or, in other words – cultivating our community cheerleaders and champions who will be problem solvers and solution seekers. One of our flagship programs has been [Leadership Elk & Cameron](#). More than 230 individuals have completed the program since 2008. These alumni have gone on to elected positions as County Commissioners, with City Councils, School Boards, Borough Councils, and as Mayors; they have also joined nonprofit boards, become poll workers, and led community improvement efforts. And indeed, the Center’s recent report on “Reversing Population Decline in Rural Pennsylvania” identified fostering civic engagement as a policy consideration.

Of course, our rural areas need to maintain tax revenues and nonprofit agencies to provide basic services and supports, but they also need well informed and passionate individuals who will make decisions about how those tax revenues and nonprofits are managed.

I cannot understate the value of community-based leadership programs in our rural areas. These programs provide awareness of our community assets and opportunities, they connect the participants to current community leaders who demonstrate how to solve community issues, and the programs foster experiences, attitudes and behaviors that spark civic readiness. In rural communities, these programs are often operated by chambers of commerce or other community-based-organizations. In more urban areas, they are their own organizations.

Additional investments in these programs will always be welcomed. The investments could be funding (most of these programs in rural areas run on a shoe string budget), educational resources like professional development, or incentives for employers to allow employees the time to volunteer.

There are also national models and frameworks to help small communities engage residents in planning and civic readiness and develop high quality community-based leadership programs.

The [Association of Leadership Programs](#) (ALP) is a valuable affinity network and source for best practices. I wish every rural leadership program in Pennsylvania had the resources to be part of this network. ALP helps organizations create intentional, high quality leadership programs.

The Orton Family Foundation developed the [Community Heart & Soul](#) model for community engagement and strategic planning. One alumnus from our Leadership program successfully led Cameron County through this program which resulted in re-engagement of residents in important decision-making processes. Cameron County now has a blueprint for priority actions related to accessibility, wellbeing of youth, senior care, safety and economic development. That alumnus of our Leadership program was just elected Commissioner.

Penn State Extension's [Intergenerational Program](#) offers a wealth of resources for communities to unite young and old in planning for population changes and finding new pathways for civic engagement. The borough of Ridgway in Elk County has recently been selected as one of two small communities to pilot a new Intergenerational strategy project with Penn State.

And speaking of youth.... We know through recent local surveys that nearly 60% of Elk and Cameron County high school youth like living in a rural area. Nearly a quarter are likely to stay or return, while just over 40% are unsure. Communities should be developing efforts around engaging these youth in their communities early, and often.

The CEC just began a new leadership program for youth in grades 9-12. Already, we know from them and their parents/guardians that they sincerely appreciate being asked about what changes they want to see in their communities. And it has energized them. One student reflected "I learned that it is a lot easier to make a difference in my community and that there are opportunities to do so everywhere I look."

Community engagement provides an opportunity for youth to see the impact they can make. It can provide youth with a sense of purpose and accomplishment, and it can boost confidence and self-esteem. Overall, it can be a great thing for improvement of overall mental health. Youth want to be involved, we just have to show them how.

Support and buy-in from the K-12 community and PDE is essential. We know that schools are saddled in regulations, and it is not always easy to allow students outside of the school walls. But that's where the magic happens! And furthermore, we need to really target the two-thirds of youth who are likely to stay or return to their communities or are still unsure. The practice of immersing students in the communities should become institutionalized as a norm and part of the K-12 fabric.

Community engagement for both youth and adults creates ownership and buy in. We show individuals, young and old, that they have the ability to improve where they live, work, study and play. Community based-leadership programs provide the education our emerging leaders need to make crucial decisions, and these programs ultimately provide the pipeline to better communities. They develop our rural cheerleaders and our champions.

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#### **In summary:**

- Seek ways to support the growth of rural community-based leadership programs for both youth and adults through professional development, incentives and/or funding
- Encourage and help rural communities to access resources which lead to the development of high-quality community-based leadership programs
- Look for ways to institutionalize community engagement in the K-12 sector, especially among students who are likely to stay or return to their rural communities